When it comes to growing food, most gardeners know that their crops tend towards either feast or famine. When we are just learning the ins and outs of growing edibles, we may end up with one measly eggplant or a few stunted tomatoes. But once we get the hang of it, we can end up with far more fruits and vegetables than we can eat. For some, setting up a table at the local farmers’ market is a viable alternative. But others have found that one of the most joyous aspects of gardening is having bounty to share with others.

In these tough economic times, when one out of every 8 Americans does not have enough food for an active, healthy life, an ideal solution would be to donate your homegrown surplus to local food banks and soup kitchens. The problem is that many of these places only accept non-perishable food items. Finding ones that accept green goods can be difficult. Fortunately, there are resources that help match growers with organizations that can put their surplus produce to the best possible use.

Started in 2008, Ample-Harvest.org (www.ample-harvest.org) was created specifically to help backyard gardeners share their bounty; they have been creating an online directory of food pantries that will accept this produce. Gardeners can search the AmpleHarvest database by entering their zip code or city, and all registered pantries within a specified distance will be listed. Entries include not only name, address and other contact information, but also days and hours that gardeners’ donations can be accepted. Specific delivery schedules may be necessary because many food pantries operate out of local churches or other civic buildings, plus many do not have refrigeration that would allow them to store produce for extended periods.

AmpleHarvest.org has the support of the USDA, Google.com, VFW, Catholic Charities, Garden Writers Association and other organizations. It operates on a non-profit basis with all involved donating their time and talent. There are no costs to food pantries or gardeners for use of the site.

Although AmpleHarvest estimates that there are 30,000 to 40,000 food pantries nationwide, at the time of this writing, they had only 22 listings in Florida. If AmpleHarvest does not list a food pantry near you, there are several other ways to find a group that will accept your produce. And please encourage any new food pantries that you locate to register on the AmpleHarvest.org website. (We helped add several to their list!) If you run across a food pantry that is too small to have computersavvy volunteers, please offer to help them register on AmpleHarvest.

Since many food pantries...
operate out of houses of worship your best bet may be to check with several of the larger churches in your area. Or search the Angel Food Ministries' site, www.angelfoodministries.com, which lists thousands of churches across the country that help get food to the needy.

FeedingAmerica.org (www.feedingamerica.org) has a link to locate food banks in your area. If you find a conveniently located foodbank, contact them to find out if they accept fresh produce.

LocalHarvest.org (www.localharvest.org) has a searchable listing of farmers' markets, family farms and other sources of locally-grown food. Some of the local farmers in your area may be able to tell you where they donate their own surplus produce.

2-1-1 is a service through the United Way that can help you locate service organizations in your immediate area. Dial 2-1-1 on your telephone and ask the operator to help you locate food banks or food pantries.

Once you contact an organization that is able to take your produce, find out if they have any specific rules about what can and cannot be donated. Also ask about dates and times for dropping off donations. On the day of your planned delivery, pick your fruits and veggies early in the morning while they are still cool. If they have been sprayed with pesticides, wash them thoroughly. Dry any damp produce. Inspect each item for serious bruising, insect damage and ripeness. Do not donate produce that you would not feed to your own family. Produce that is overripe, has mushy spots or is seriously blemished should not be donated; instead, add them to soups, stews or a compost pile. Unless they have given you other instructions, package your produce in paper supermarket bags and take them to the pantry at the requested time.

Don’t worry if you only have a few items. Your produce will be pooled with that of other backyard gardeners in your area.

How can you help if you don’t grow fruits and veggies? Use the websites listed in this article to find a food bank or pantry close to home. Find out what they need besides fresh produce. Shop buy-one-get-one-free sales at your local market and donate the extra item to the needy. In addition to helping local food pantries register at AmpleHarvest, encourage nursery and garden shop owners to post a flier about AmpleHarvest in a conspicuous location to encourage other gardeners to share. (Download the flier from www.AmpleHarvest.org/downloads/GardenShop.pdf)

According to AmpleHarvest's founder, Gary Oppenheimer, "In our current economic climate, food pantries need community support more than ever, while at the same time, many people are unable to make monetary donations. The AmpleHarvest.org campaign enables backyard gardeners to help feed the hungry by reaching into their backyards instead of their back pockets.”

Why Donate

❤️ An estimated 100 billion pounds of food - enough to totally eliminate hunger in this country - is thrown away annually.

❤️ In 2007, 36.2 million people lived in households considered to be food insecure (A household is considered food insecure when its occupants live in hunger or fear of starvation.)

❤️ Demand at food banks across the country increased by 30% in 2008 from the previous year.

❤️ Local food pantries generally do not include fresh produce because of distribution and storage issues, leaving food-pantry clients with access only to canned vegetables and fruit.

❤️ And lastly, donate because you are fortunate enough to have a garden in which to grow your own food.

Betsy Franz is a freelance writer and photographer from Melbourne. She wrote about Florida's wildflowers in our June/July 2009 issue. Visit her Website: www.naturedetails.net.

Dec/Jan 10 33